

THE BON AIR PULPIT

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Scripture: *I Corinthians 13:1-5*

Sermon: *Mark of a Genuine Christian*

Mark of a Genuine Christian

This morning we are going to read out of one of the mountain-peak chapters in the Bible; it is 1 Corinthians 13. It is a chapter that is often read at weddings and at many other very special occasions. It is the chapter called the chapter of love.

I need to put before you the setting of this chapter so you can understand how it appears in the Bible. This chapter and chapters 12, 13 and 14 are all one unit that has to do with the question of spiritual gifts. Let me remind you about spiritual gifts. *When you give your heart and your life to Christ the Bible says you receive the gift-- singular, gift--of the Holy Spirit.* That simply means you not only trust the Christ who is back there or God who is up there, but *when you give your life to Christ God comes to live inside you in the presence of the Holy Spirit.* He sustains us, He guides us, He teaches us, He encourages us; and the wonderful good news about being a Christian is God lives inside of us.

When the Holy Spirit comes in, He gives us gifts, plural. *A gift--of the gifts variety--is an ability to serve God or to serve others.* The early Christians were asking questions about these gifts. How were they to be used? How can they be used? But primarily they were asking because some of them felt that if they could do things for God, that was a source of pride. Paul writes to remind them that spiritual gifts were not given so you could be proud of what you are doing, but rather you are to be useful or useable to others.

Spiritual gifts are not to make you feel sovereign over others, but to make you a servant to others. One of the great joys of a spiritual gift is that it gives you the ability to serve God and to serve others. If you are present this morning and you are a believer, you can rest assured that you have one of these gifts, abilities. You have a chance to serve God and there should never be a person who says, "I can't do anything for God; I can't do anything for others." You need to understand that is not humility; that is heresy. *Every*

person has an ability to serve God. That is what Paul is writing about.

How 1 Corinthians 13 fits in is this. Some people are proud of what they are doing. Some people do things for God without the proper motive. What God says is that *it is not only what you do, but also why you are doing it, in what spirit it is being done.* If you do it to call attention to yourself, then that is the wrong motive. If you do it to serve others because you love them, that is the proper motive. What Paul is going to do is to explain to us some of the ways in which one can serve God, but with the wrong motive. Let me read them together. *"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but have not love I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."*

We, as Christians, understand that at the end of life we are going to have to give an account unto God. So there is no question more important to us than whether or not we are being acceptable to Him. Nothing is more distressing to us than to know that we are doing things that really are not pleasing to Him. In this passage Paul lists seven things that are good to do, seven gifts that people have the ability to do; however, he says that unless they are accompanied by the right attitude, accompanied by love, then they are not acceptable to Him. What he did was to list seven opportunities to serve God and others. Let me walk through them with you to help you understand them.

First of all, he said some people have the *gift to speak.* Somehow people have always thought that if a person could stand up and speak, teach or sing or had a vocal gift, then surely that means he must be very close to God. The people in Greece had always had great orators, silver-tongued people, who could just charm you, inspire you, and help you. Yet Paul says that you may have the ability to speak and have many vocal gifts, but if that is not accompanied by love, than you are going to find it does not profit you anything. When a person is finished speaking, you should not be attracted to how he can speak, you ought to be attracted to the God who gave him the ability. *Paul says is that if you speak and you do not do it in love for God and others, what you have is an ability that is not pleasing to God.*

Some of you will have the ability of *prophecy.* Prophecy is the ability, in this context, to see the future.

All of us who recognize the change of time around us would like nothing more than to know what tomorrow is going to bring. That is the reason that this morning fifteen hundred newspapers will have horoscopes in them, and in the city of Richmond two hours every week are given over to psychic programs because people want to know about tomorrow. If somebody could come to you and say, "I have a word from God; this is what is going to happen to you tomorrow," you would look at him and say, "Oh, he must be so close to God." *Yet Paul says that if you have that gift and have not love, then you are not pleasing to God.*

He says some people have the gift of *fathoming all mysteries.* How many things do we not understand, how many times do we ask the question: why? Wouldn't it be something if someone could come into your house, sit down with you, open the Bible and say, "This is why this is happening to you." You would say "My goodness, he must be so close to God." Yet Paul says, *"If they don't have love, it is not of value."*

He said that some people have the *gift of all knowledge.* Just think of how many areas of life you don't know anything about. Suppose someone could come in with an absolute genius intellect to begin to unfold to you all the mysteries about God, all of the things about the Bible. You would say, "My goodness, how wonderful he is." *Paul says that if you don't have love, it is nothing.*

Some of you have the *gift of faith.* Faith is the ability to say, "Let's go ahead and trust God, depend on God, even when everybody else is saying, 'We don't have the resources to do it.'" They are the inspirers, they are the encouragers and they are the ones who say, "With God, we can do anything." *Yet Paul said that if they stand up and encourage you to go forward with their faith, and have not love, they are nothing.*

Some of you *give* everything you have to the poor. This week we have been celebrating the home going of Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa spent all of her life giving everything she had away. You might have heard at her state funeral what she had. She had two pieces of clothing, a Bible, one little piece of furniture. All of her life she had given everything away. Paul said that you might be a Mother Theresa and people might say, "Aren't you

generous; you gave everything you had away,” *but if you don’t do it from the proper motive, it is nothing.*

The *last one*: Paul said, “*You might be so dedicated to your faith that if someone comes to you and says, ‘Give up what you believe or die,’ you would step forward and say, ‘I will die for what I believe;’*” but when the flames are burning around your body, *if you are doing it to call attention to yourself, rather than in love for God, it profits you nothing.*

Three times Paul lists the seven great attributes of service to God, but three times he says, “*If you don’t do it for love, it is of no value.*” Just think, giving your life in service and thinking you are pleasing God, and then recognizing that it doesn’t make an impact on Him because it isn’t done for the right reason. The question you need to ask yourself this morning is not *what* you are doing, but *why* you are doing it. You need to ask yourself, “Am I doing it out of a love for God, for what He has done for me, and am I doing it out of a love for other people?” If that is the dominant emotion of your life, the dominant principle of your life, than whatever you do will be acceptable unto Him. We need to remind ourselves that *God gives us a chance to live so we can learn how to love.* The reason we are here is to receive God’s love and to give it back to Him and to share it with each other. You can determine the quality of person that you are and the depth of Christian that you are by how much you love each other.

There is only one university system in America, to my knowledge, that has a major in love. Dr. Leo Bescali, who teaches in the California system, teaches a course simply entitled “Love.” If you go into Dr. Bescali’s class, you don’t sit back and take notes. The first thing that you do is get a chance to know everybody around you. The second thing that you do is hug everybody when you enter the class or leave the class. The third thing you do is find some means of investing yourself in the lives of others. It almost sounds like church, doesn’t it? Dr. Bescali’s says that in teaching he got tired hearing people say, “I don’t like this.” He wanted to hear what they did like. He said they used to say, “I hate this.” He wanted to hear what they liked. He heard people say, “This is what is wrong.” He wanted people to say, “This is what is right.” He said, “When I leave this world I want people to say I made a contribution to making life better.”

Whatever church is and whatever the Christian life is, it is somehow expressing this most wonderful emotion in all the areas of our lives, the place where love is. I would pray for your life that when people see you, they would not see just a dedicated person, but they would see a loving

person. They would not see a talented person; they would see a loving person. They would see a person who is willing to go the second mile and be helpful to others. I would pray for this church that when people ask about Bon Air Church, the answer would be that it is the most loving group of people you would find anywhere. If that is true, then you and I begin to understand about the great truth of life.

Now one of our biggest problems with what I just said is that we have a problem with the English language. The English language has only one word for love. So when I look at my little dog, I can say I love my dog. When my wife fixes an apple pie, I can say I love an apple pie. I can come to church and say I love God. But do you notice that for a dog, a pie, and for God I used the same word? That is the reason Paul gives you four attributes and says to you, “Here are things that are always true.” In verse seven he says that *love always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres.* Let me walk through those with you so you can understand what he is talking about, and you can test your love life.

Number *one: love always protects.* The word *protect* means *to build a roof over.* It means that here is a person subject to all the elements of life. When you come you put a roof over him and you say to him, “You are of such value to me I want to protect you from the harms and hurts of life.” This week I have been with my family, and one day one of the little children-- three years old--became frightened. His mother put her arms around the three-year-old, kissed him on the cheek, and said, “Everything is okay.” I looked at them and thought, this is what it means to protect. The same three-year-old, after he got over being frightened, went running out into a parking lot. Dad did the fifty-yard dash, threw his arms around the little boy, and said, “You can’t run out here, you will get hit by a car.” Again I thought, this is what it means to protect.

When you love somebody, when you love a teenager, you protect him or her from all the moral evils of this world. When you love somebody in marriage, you want to protect that person from all the hurts and harms of the world. When you love other people, what you are trying to say to them is, “I don’t want harm to come to you. I don’t want any damage to come to you. I want to put a roof over you. I want to love you with all my heart.”

It means, also, that you protect their reputation. It means you are not going to let somebody harm them by what is said about them. Let me tell you what the word *gossip* means. The word *gossip* means that *a sheep has a sore on his nose.* A sheep can’t scratch, so a sheep finds another sheep with a sore on his nose. They sit there and rub their sores together. That is what the word *gossip* means. Gossip means you take the sickness of your soul and you rub it against someone else’s sick soul. You share gossip about someone. To protect means “I love you so much I don’t want any harm to come to you, any hurt to come to you.”

Recently a man said to me, “Every time we are in a group and someone says something harmful about someone, I say, “You know, I don’t want to be a part of this conversation. I think we ought to encourage the people, and I turn around and leave.” What would it mean in a world intent on finding out the dirt about everybody if we could say, “I love you enough that I protect you.”

During the time of, and after, Princess Diana’s death, we have learned that the number one newspaper in the United States and the number one newspaper in the country of England--in terms of sales--are scandal sheets that people buy. Do you know why people take pictures of people who are well known, and do you know why they are sometimes given a half-a-million dollars for a picture? Because the best-selling publications in the United States and Great Britain are scandal sheets. Do you know why they have a million dollars to pay for a picture? Because people like us buy them. *Love says, “I love you, I don’t want people to talk about you, I don’t want harm to come to you.” Love throws a roof over them and says, “I love you and I protect you.”*

The *second* thing Paul said is that *love trusts people’s intentions.* It trusts. Every one of us has a choice to make. You can either be totally gullible (gullible people believe everything about anything) or you can be a cynical person (cynical people don’t believe anything about anything). *A Christian is a person who believes the best about other people’s intentions.* He gives them the benefit of the doubt. When they make a mistake he doesn’t always remind them of it. He says to them, “I believe the best about you.” In Christ a Christian can somehow say, “I am not always going to be so hard and brittle with people. I am going to trust the best about them.”

I had to determine to think this way early in my ministry. The first little church I had when I got out of seminary was in Louisiana. The church had built a parsonage in the back of a subdivision on a dead-end street. I was in the parsonage one day when a man rang the bell. He said, “I am on my way from Florida to Nashville and I have run out of gas and I want to know if you will help me.” I did a little calculation in my mind: from Florida to Nashville and he has ended up in Baton Rouge? He found my subdivision and he came to the back of the subdivision on a dead end street? He just happened to be in the neighborhood and wanted to know if I could give him five dollars for gas? I knew he had figured out a way to get money, so I asked him, “How did you find me?”

He said I was known as a man who would help others. I knew I was being set up. I said to myself that day, “Self, are you going to give the man five dollars or you going to say to him get lost?” I determined that day I would give him five dollars? I have spent a lifetime hearing people say all kinds of things, but I determined back then and what I have tried to say today: I am going to believe the best about you, and if it is not true that is your problem and not mine. Somehow you have got to believe the best about folk. If you look upon people with jaded eyes, always expecting the worst, how can you love somebody like that?

The *third one: you expect the best from folk.* You try to help them become the best they can be. Sometimes people say that people become what they think they can be. That is only partially true. Psychologists tell us people become more of what they think others think about them. If you think they are nothing, they will end up being nothing. If you remind them they are nobodies they will wind up being nobodies. If you come to them and say, “I believe in you, I trust in you,” then they are going to begin to trust in themselves. If a wife is always saying to her husband, “You come home and never talk to me,” you know what? He isn’t going to talk anymore, either. “I don’t why you always nag me.” You know what? She is going to keep on nagging him. If you say to a child, “You always mess up,” he is always going to mess up. If you expect the best of him, and say, “You know you excite me by what

you have done. That is good,” he will begin to do more and more.

Brother Wilkinson is a Christian writer and talks about high school. In high school they had Section A, which was for the brightest students. If a person got into Section A, it was because the teachers thought he was the best and said to him, “We are going to give you the hardest tests and we are going to ask the most of you.” But the truth was that there was no Section A. The children weren’t selected because they were the brightest and best, but because they thought they were the brightest and best, they made the best grades in school. Finally, one child, after learning the truth, asked, “Why do you say there is a Section A?” Brother Wilkinson said the teacher said, “I set them up. I wanted them to believe in themselves.” I want to ask you today, who do love enough to set up, to help them believe in themselves because you love them.

Listen to the *last* one. *You endure other people’s hurts because you love them.* If you are in a love relationship you are always going to get hurt. There are always going to be times when there is criticism, hard words, and hurt. But if you love them, it means you are going to stay in there, stay with them, overlook the problems, and go beyond them and say, “You are never going to drive me away. I love you so much I am going to stay in spite of what you have done.” *Have you ever recognized that is exactly how God loves you? God puts a roof over you. God loves you so much he values you. God expects the best out of you, God overlooks your faults. God perseveres ever when you don’t love Him back. What he says is, “I want people who love like that, I want people who care like that.”*

I have told you before, but let me repeat for some. One of the things I like very much is good soup. A friend of mine told me about a place, and he said, “I know you would like it, and let me take you one night as my guest.” The place was beautiful; and the waiter came out and I said I wanted the soup of the day. He came out with a little towel and put the silver down. I could hardly wait, and when I put the spoon in I looked and swimming across the top was a bug. Bugs don’t eat much, but that bug ruined the soup. You can be in the best place, with the best reputation, and have the best soup, but if you get a bug in it, it doesn’t mean much.

Dear friend, you can look at your life, and do so much, and yet if you don’t have love, you are a Christian with a bug in you. What you need to ask yourself is this: Am I a person of love, do I love God with all my heart, all my soul and all my strength? Do people know I love them? If

that is true of you, then they will know you have been with the Lord.